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ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted to explore public knowledge about the U.S. educational system and postsecondary degree completion in particular. The survey studied public knowledge of and perceptions about the challenges facing high school students, including low-income and minority groups, trying to move on to college and succeed once they are there. The study also gauged public opinion about various policy options to improve the system so that more students move successfully from high school and on to and through college. The national survey, which was conducted in fall 2003, included 1,010 U.S. citizens aged 18 and older, with oversampling of African Americans and Hispanics. Most respondents believed that high schools need improvement, and almost half believe major changes are needed. More than half of those surveyed believed that the secondary and postsecondary systems do not work well together, and that better coordination is needed to help students move successfully from high school into and through college. Most Americans realize how few students who begin high school will eventually complete college. There is near universal agreement that the large numbers of students who do not earn college degrees is a problem for the United States. Americans believe that cost is the primary impediment for students, especially lower income students, in pursuit of a degree. Majorities believe increasing financial aid would help more students complete their degrees, but a majority agrees that cost is not the only obstacle. They want to see high schools do a better job and to see better teachers in the schools. Americans are divided about the best way to increase the number of minority students who go to college succeed once they are there. Americans also disagree about who should be responsible for fixing the problems of the education system, with variations by race, ethnicity, educational attainment, and political party. (SLD)

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JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

CREATING STRATEGIES
for Educational and Economic Opportunity

Leaks in the Postsecondary Pipeline:

A Survey of Americans

Commissioned by Jobs for the Future

Conducted by Lake Snell Perry & Associates, Inc.

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Leaks in the Postsecondary Pipeline:

A Survey of Americans

Commissioned by Jobs for the Future

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Jobs for the Future, in preparation for their conference *Double the Numbers: Postsecondary Education and Underserved Youth,* hired Lake Snell Perry & Associates to conduct this survey about America's educational system in general and postsecondary degree completion in particular. The survey explored public knowledge of and perceptions about the challenges facing high school students – including lower-income and minority students – trying to move on to college and succeed once they are there. The study also gauged public opinion about various policy options to improve the system so more students move successfully from high school on to and through college. This national survey of 1,010 Americans age 18 and older was conducted September 23 through October 5, 2003 and included oversamples of African Americans and Hispanics.[1]

The main findings include:

- Most Americans believe the nation's high schools need to be improved; almost half believe *major* changes are needed. Americans are more positive about the nation's colleges and universities, but most still believe at least some changes are needed in our nation's postsecondary institutions.
- Over half of those surveyed believe that these two systems – that is the nation's secondary and postsecondary institutions – do not work well together and that better coordination is needed to help students move successfully from high school onto and through college. In short, the majority of Americans are aware of, and troubled by, the "leaks" in the postsecondary pipeline.
- Most Americans realize how few students who begin high school will eventually complete college. They know about high high school dropout rates and that only about three quarters of high school graduates go on to college. Fewer – though still a majority – are aware of our nation's even higher college non-completion rates. More importantly, there is near universal agreement that the large number of students who do not earn college degrees is a major problem for the US.
- Americans believe cost is the primary impediment for students – especially lower-income students – in the pursuit of a college degree. Majorities believe increasing financial aid for needy students would help more college students complete their degrees. Majorities also feel offering college scholarships to high school students who get good grades would help a lot more students go on to college.
- Cost is not the only obstacle. A majority of Americans believes high schools need to do a better job preparing their students for college. They want to see better high school teachers in the

[1] Altogether 639 non-Hispanic Whites, 161 non-Hispanic African Americans and 171 Hispanics were surveyed. For results based on total sample, oversampled groups were weighted to reflect their true representative proportion.

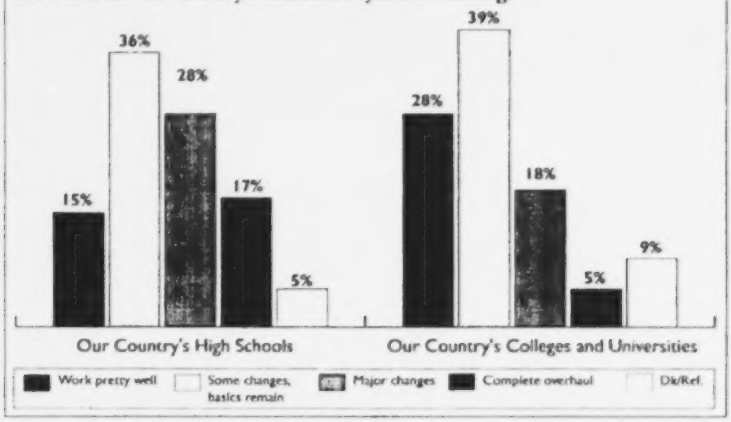
classroom. Moreover, they feel it is important for guidance counselors to do more to help students understand the value of college, and help them choose and apply to colleges that are right for them. For students already in college, most believe tutoring and mentoring programs for students in academic jeopardy would increase graduation rates.

- Americans are supportive of education strategies – such as early college high schools – which allow high school students an opportunity to experience college courses and earn college credit. The solidity of their support varies slightly across three different "early exposure" strategies.
- Americans are divided about the best way to increase the number of minority students who go to college and succeed once they are there. Extra help in high school is the most popular approach, but half choose other options. Few believe affirmative action should be the primary tool for helping more minority students go to and graduate from postsecondary institutions.
- When it comes to issues such as the overall condition of America's high schools and postsecondary institutions, who should be responsible for fixing the problems with the education system, and what policy solutions will work best, not all Americans are on the same page. There are interesting and surprising variations by race, ethnicity, educational attainment, and political party.

Many believe the nation's high schools need improvement; fewer see problems with colleges and universities. Most believe better coordination is needed between the two.

The large majority of Americans want to see changes in our nation's high schools. As Figure One shows, only about one in seven (15%) believe our high schools work pretty well now, the rest think changes are needed. Over a third (36%) think that some changes are needed but high schools should remain basically the same. Almost half (45%) believe that, at the very least, major changes are needed; just over a quarter (28%) call for major changes, and one in six (17%) call for a complete overhaul.

Figure 1:
How well are our country's education systems working?

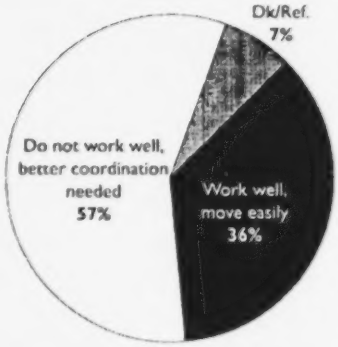


Americans are more sanguine about the nation's colleges and universities, though most still think some change is called for. Just over a quarter (28%) believe they are doing well as is. Four in ten (39%) believe minor changes are needed. Only a quarter (23%) call for major changes (18%) or a complete overhaul of the system (5%). One in ten (9%) feel they do not know enough about the nation's postsecondary education system to judge.

There is also fairly broad recognition that the interaction between these two systems needs improvement. As Figure Two shows, almost six in ten (57%) Americans believe that "the system does not work well and better coordination is needed to help students go from high school to college and succeed once they are there." Just over a third (36%) believe the system works well now and that students move easily from high school to college.

There are interesting group differences in public opinion about the state of education. Hispanics tend to be more positive than others. A quarter of Hispanics (26%) think that America's high schools work pretty well now compared with just one in seven (14%) whites and one in ten (11%) African Americans. African-Americans have a more negative view of our nation's high schools; a quarter (25%) believe a complete system overhaul is needed compared with just one in six whites (17%) and one in twenty (6%) Hispanics. Similar differences exist in people's opinion about America's postsecondary institutions. Hispanics tend to be more positive about our universities than whites and African Americans. There are also educational differences. The more

Figure 2:
How well does the transition work for high school students who want to go on to college?



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education an American has, the more critical they are of the current state of the nation's high schools and universities.

Interestingly, there are no significant group differences when it comes to the issue of the transition from high school to college.

Most Americans are aware of high dropout rates from high school. Somewhat fewer are aware of how many college students do not complete their degrees.

Most Americans are aware of how few students make it through high school and onto and through college. In fact, some Americans *overestimate* the extent of the problem; that is, they believe even fewer young people successfully move through the system than actually do. Roughly 75 percent of students who start high school graduate from high school. As Table One shows, the plurality of Americans (44%) know – or guess – that this is the completion rate. Two in ten (20%) mistakenly believe that a full 90 percent of students complete high school. A full third of Americans (32%) think that high school graduation rates are even worse than they really are; two in ten (20%) believe only half of high school students graduate and 12 percent believe only a third do.

People are even more pessimistic in their perceptions of the share of high school graduates who go on to college. In reality, roughly 75 percent of high school graduates start college. Only about one in seven (15%) Americans knows that matriculation levels are this high. Most (81%) believe that fewer high school graduates start college; almost four in ten (38%) believe that only a third of high school graduates continue their studies.

Table One: Public beliefs about education completion rates

Estimated Percent*	*Of those who start high school, what percent...* Graduate High School	*Of those who graduate high school, what percent...* Start College	*Of those who start college, what percent...* Complete college
33%	12	38	22
50%	20	43	42
75%	44	15	29
90%	20	3	5
Dk/ref	4	2	3

The one area in which a substantial number of Americans *underestimate* the severity of the problem is college completion. Only about half of those who start college complete their studies. The plurality of Americans (42%) know this, and two in ten (22%) believe completion rates are even lower. However, a full third (34%) underestimate the problem, mistakenly believing that three-quarters (29%) or nine in ten (5%) of those who start college finish college. In short, unlike high school drop-out rates, about which Americans seem well aware, a substantial minority of Americans are unaware of our nation's high college drop-out rate.

There are some interesting racial and ethnic differences here. African Americans, and to a lesser extent Hispanics, are more likely than whites to underestimate the number of students who advance through the educational ranks. Half of African Americans (52%) and four in ten Hispanics (41%) underestimate the number of students who graduate from high school. By comparison, just over a quarter (28%) of whites believe fewer students graduate from high school than actually do. African Americans also tend to think fewer high school graduates go on to college than actually do; half (50%) believe only a third of high school graduates go on to college compared with just over four in ten (43%) Hispanics and a third (35%) of whites.

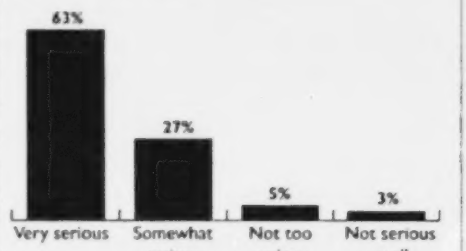
African Americans (36%) and Hispanics (30%) are also more likely than whites (18%) to underestimate college completion rates. These differences may reflect – at least in part – differences in education attainment among these populations.

There is widespread agreement that having a college degree is very important. A large majority also agree that so few young people earning college degrees is a serious problem for our nation.

Most Americans (79%) agree that having a college degree is more important for economic success today than it was 20 or 30 years ago. Two-thirds (67%) believe it is *a lot* more important. Americans across the board recognize the importance of a college degree in today's economy.

Most Americans also agree that the low number of students beginning high school who will eventually graduate from college is a serious national problem. As Figure Three shows, nine in ten (90%) believe this is a serious problem, including over six in ten (63%) who feel it is *very* serious. This opinion, too, is shared by people from different walks of life.

Figure 3:
How serious a problem is it that only about 29% of students who start high school will eventually graduate from college?

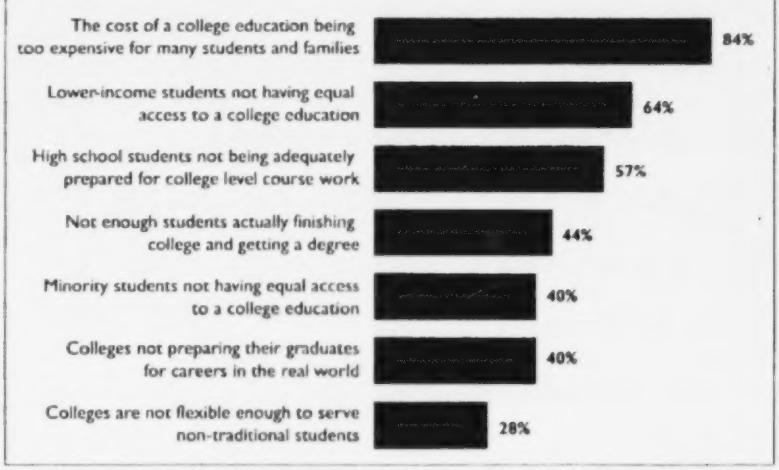


Cost is seen as the biggest problem and the majority believe students are not adequately prepared for college. Fewer perceive non-completion of college as a major problem.

When Americans are asked about a number of problems facing the education system and the students moving through it, the cost of a higher education tops the list. (Figure Four) Over eight in ten (84%) say "the cost of a college education being too expensive for many students and families" is a major problem facing our nation's education system today. Concerns about cost are universal; the cost of higher education tops the list of concerns for all subgroups surveyed.

Similarly, almost two-thirds (64%) say lower-income students not having equal access to a college education is a major problem. Those with annual incomes under $75,000 are more

Figure 4:
How important are each of the following for our nation's education system
% saying major problem


The cost of a college education being too expensive for many students and families
84%
Lower-income students not having equal access to a college education
64%
High school students not being adequately prepared for college level course work
57%
Not enough students actually finishing college and getting a degree
44%
Minority students not having equal access to a college education
40%
Colleges not preparing their graduates for careers in the real world
40%
Colleges are not flexible enough to serve non-traditional students
28%

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likely to consider this a major problem than those with higher incomes (69% vs. 45%). African Americans (81%) are more likely to consider this a major problem than Hispanics (65%) or whites (61%). Lastly, Democrats (74%) are more likely to consider this a major problem then Independents (58%) or Republicans (55%).

Given people's focus on the shortcomings of America's high schools, it is not surprising that over half (57%) say high school students not being prepared for college level work is a major problem. African Americans (74%) are especially likely to consider this a major problem.

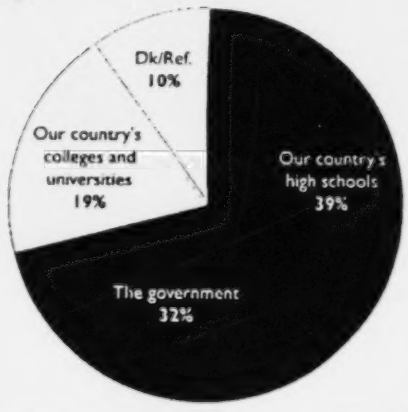
Just over four in ten (44%) consider it a major problem that not enough students actually finish college. Six in ten African Americans (63%) and Hispanics (59%) consider this a major problem compared with just four in ten (40%) whites. Those without a college education are more likely to consider this a major problem than those with a college degree (48% vs. 28%).

Minority students not having equal access to education is considered a major problem by four in ten (40%) Americans. Not surprisingly, minorities feel more strongly about this issue than whites do. The majority of African Americans (64%) and Hispanics (55%) consider this a major problem compared with just a third (34%) of whites. Democrats (49%) are more likely to consider this a major problem than Independents (36%) or Republicans (26%).

Americans believe high schools should be out in front doing more to help young people go to college and succeed once they are there.

Survey respondents were asked who, other than students and their families, should play the largest role in insuring that more young people get into and graduate from college. High schools top the list; a four in ten plurality (39%) believe our nation's high schools have the largest role to play. (Figure Five) A third (32%) believe the government should play the largest role. Only two in ten (19%) feel this responsibility should lie with colleges and universities.

Figure 5:
Other than students and families, which of the following should play the largest role in insuring that more young people get into and graduate from college?



Responses to this question differ among groups. Whites look first to high schools (41%), then to the government (29%), and third to the nation's universities (19%). By comparison, African Americans look first to the government (43%) and then to high schools (35%) as do Hispanics (43%, 30% respectively). Similarly, those with a high school education are somewhat more likely to look to the government than those with post-high school educational experience who, in turn, are somewhat more likely to look to the nation's high schools.

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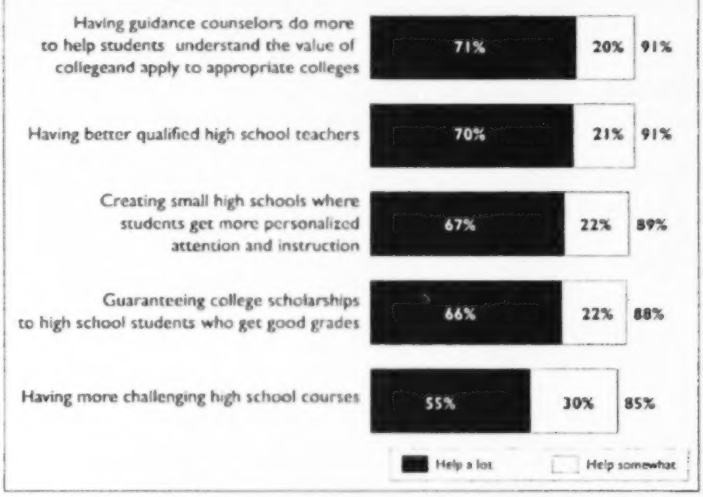
Better guidance and better teachers top the list of high school based solutions.

Survey respondents were asked about a number of solutions which would help more young people get into college and succeed once they are there. Several of the proposed solutions would focus on students still in high school. As Figure Six shows, most Americans consider all of the proposed solutions promising.

Figure 6:
How much would this help high school students get into college and do well once they are there?



Nine in ten (91%) Americans believe "having high school guidance counselors do more to help students understand the value of college, and help them choose and apply to colleges that are right for them" would help high students get into college and succeed once they are there. Seven in ten (71%) believe this would help *a lot*. Respondents who did not graduate from college feel more strongly about this than those who have a four-year degree (74% vs. 61%).

Nine in ten (91%) also believe that having better qualified high school teachers will improve students' chances in college; seven in ten (70%) feel it will help *a lot*. Hispanics (78%) feel especially strongly about the need for better qualified teachers. Americans with only a high school degree or less feel more strongly about this than those with post-high school educational experience (74% vs. 65%).

Creating small high schools where students get more personalized attention and instruction is also considered promising by a majority of the public (89%). Two-thirds (67%) believe this would be a big step in helping high school students go to and succeed in college.

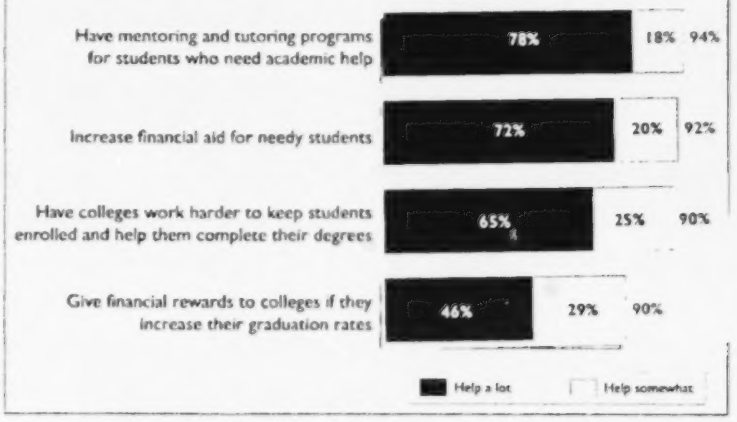
Guaranteeing college scholarships to students who do well in high school is also a popular idea. Nine in ten (88%) think this would help, including two-thirds (66%) who think it would help a lot. Some groups are more enthusiastic about the idea of providing scholarships to students with good grades than others. Eight in ten (82%) Hispanics think such scholarships would help a lot as do three-quarters (75%) of African Americans. Slightly fewer whites (62%), though still a majority, agree. Democrats (74%) are more optimistic about this policy than Independents (66%) and Republicans (56%).

Having more challenging high school courses is also a popular proposal, though the public seems to find it somewhat less compelling than the other ideas explored. Over eight in ten (85%) think this would help; over half (55%) think it would help a lot. Republicans (59%) and Independents (59%) have a slightly more positive view of this solution than Democrats (52%). Indeed, this is the only solution which Republicans are more enthusiastic about than Democrats.

Mentoring and tutoring, and increased financial aid, are the most popular college fixes. There is less support for rewarding colleges financially for increasing their graduation rates.

In addition to being asked about high school based approaches, participants were also asked about a number of solutions focused on helping students once they are in college to do well and complete their studies. As Figure Seven shows, over nine in ten (94%) feel mentoring and tutoring programs for students who need academic help would help, including eight in ten (78%) who feel it would help *a lot*. This solution is considered valuable by all the subgroups surveyed.

Figure 7:
How much would this help college students do well in college and stay to graduate?



Participants also believe increasing financial aid for needy students will help more students successfully complete college. Nine in ten (92%) feel this will help, including seven in ten (72%) who feel it will help *a lot*. African Americans (78%) and Hispanics (83%) are more likely than whites (70%) to feel this will help a lot. Those who do not have a four-year college degree (76%) are more likely to feel this will help a lot than those who have graduated from college (61%). Democrats (79%) and those who make less than $40,000 annually (78%) also find this solution especially promising.

Most (90%) feel that having colleges work to increase their graduate rates will help, and two-thirds (65%) feel this will help a lot. However, fewer support giving colleges financial rewards for increasing their graduation rates. Though three-quarters (75%) feel this will help, less than half (46%) feel it will help a lot. African Americans (58%) and Hispanics (62%) are more likely to feel this will help a lot than whites (42%). Likewise, those with lower incomes and less education are more supportive of this measure than those who are wealthier and have more schooling. Interestingly, confidence in this measure does not vary by political party.

Programs – such as early college high schools – that allow high school students to take college courses are viewed as promising, but Americans are a little less vigorous in their support of these programs.

One strategy for improving educational outcomes is the integration of secondary and postsecondary education to accelerate students toward a postsecondary credential. The idea behind this "early exposure" strategy is that if high school students could see what college-level courses are like and start earning college credits earlier, more of them would go to college and succeed once they got there.

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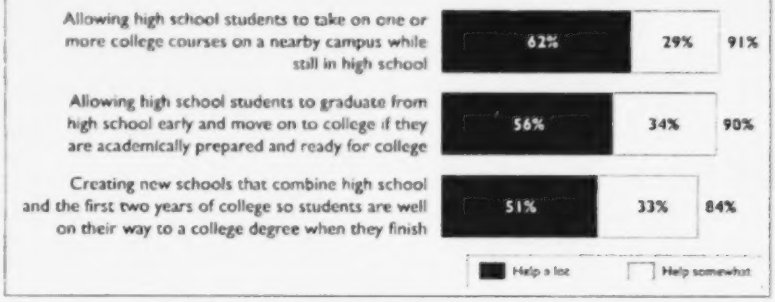
Survey respondents were asked about three different ideas that fall under this rubric. As shown in Figure Eight, Americans tend to feel these approaches will help more high school students go on to successful college careers. However, they are a little less enthusiastic about some of these ideas than the solutions discussed above, such as having better qualified high school teachers and mentoring and tutoring programs for college students.

Figure 8:
Early exposure to college strategies: Would this help more high school students get into college and do well once they are there?


Allowing high school students to take on one or more college courses on a nearby campus while still in high school
62%
29%
91%
Allowing high school students to graduate from high school early and move on to college if they are academically prepared and ready for college
56%
34%
90%
Creating new schools that combine high school and the first two years of college so students are well on their way to a college degree when they finish
51%
33%
84%
Help a lot
Help somewhat

Nine in ten (91%) support the idea of allowing high school students to take one or more college courses while still in high school; six in ten (62%) believe this will help a lot of high school students succeed in college. Similarly, nine in ten (90%) believe it will help young people if high school students who are academically prepared and ready for college are allowed to graduate from high school and move on to college early. Just over half (56%) think this would help a lot. Support for both of these measures is fairly constant across subgroups.

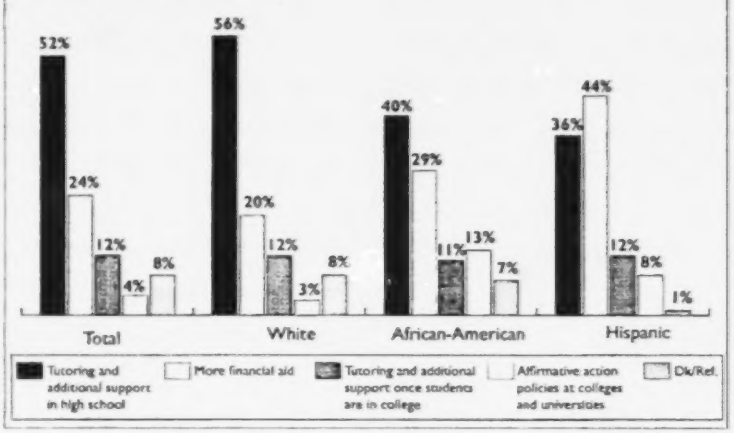
Americans are a little less definitive about the idea of creating new schools that combine high school and the first two years of college. Over eight in ten (84%) believe this would help more high school students go to and succeed at college and half (51%) think it would help a lot. Hispanics are particularly enthused about this idea. Seven in ten (72%) Hispanics think this would help a lot of students compared with just half (51%) of African Americans and of whites (47%). Those with annual incomes under $75,000, perhaps recognizing the potential cost savings of such a program, are more likely to feel this would help a lot of students than those in the upper income brackets (56% vs. 36%). Similarly, those with less formal education are more enthusiastic about this idea than those with more; over half (54%) of those without a college degree believe this will help a lot compared with just four in ten (40%) college graduates. Independents (59%) find this idea more promising than Democrats (44%) or Republicans (45%).

Americans are divided about how best to help more minority students go to and succeed in college. Extra help in high school is the most popular strategy, but half point to other means.
Respondents were asked about the best way to ensure that more minority students get into and graduate from college. Specifically they were asked to pick among four alternatives:

1. Tutoring and additional support in high school;
2. More financial aid;
3. Affirmative action policies at colleges and universities; and
4. Tutoring and additional support once the students are in college.

As Figure Nine shows, half (52%) believe tutoring and additional support in high school is the best tool for helping minority students succeed in post-secondary education. A quarter (24%) believe more financial aid is the key to helping minority students. Twelve percent believe tutoring and additional support in college is the most important tool. Just four percent believe affirmative action policies at colleges and universities is the most important tool. In interpreting these results it is important to note that this is not a vote against affirmative action. Rather it shows a preference for other methods.

Figure 9:
Which of these is the best way to ensure that more minority students get into and graduate from college?



Preferences vary somewhat by racial and ethnic group. Whites far and away believe support at the high school level is the most important tool (56%). Far fewer choose any of the other options. A plurality of African Americans (40%) also believe high school help is the most important tool. However, substantial numbers also believe financial aid is the key (29%). African Americans (13%) are far more likely than whites (3%) to feel affirmative action is the most important tool, though even among African Americans this is a view held by relatively few respondents.

Hispanics are most likely to feel financial aid is the most important factor (44%) followed by help in high school (36%). Hispanics, like African Americans, are more likely than whites too feel that affirmative action should be the principal tool (8% vs. 3%), but among Hispanics too relatively few hold this opinion.

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